On a trip to the Internet, be sure to bring your manners

By Dustin Michael Harris, July 17, 2008

The Internet is a lot like the Wild West. It has its own code of ethics and sometimes passersby and even the townsfolk can find themselves in a whole mess of trouble. Fortunately, all hangings are simulated.

Over the last 10 years, the Web has grown dramatically from one million pages to about 600 billion. At one point in my life, I used the Internet for the sole purpose of checking my e-mail and finding Led Zeppelin lyrics. Now, the Web is a utility. It's as vital to my ability to live and work comfortably as having electricity and running water.

ON THE WEB
Visit www.netlingo.com for a list of acronyms used in text messaging.

But navigating the Web can be tricky for not only those who are just signing on to message boards or creating MySpace and Facebook accounts, but also veteran users. As freewheeling as the digital world can be, there is an etiquette to it all. Any good Internet user should know certain things so as not to embarrass themselves or drive others crazy.

Virginia Shea dubbed all this "Netiquette" in her 1994 book of the same name. With all the cyber growth we've experienced in the last 14 years, Shea's book could use some updating. However, her golden rule is still quite viable: "Remember the human."

Shea urges us all to remember that even though we may be answering e-mails, writing blogs or commenting on YouTube videos in the comfort of our own home, thousands of miles away from those who might be reading, everyone involved is a human being. Simply put, the people on the other end have feelings, so don't be a jerk. I repeat, DON'T BE A JERK! Writing in all-caps is the equivalent of shouting on the Web. I think the same applies for print).

And there are plenty of jerks on the Web. Some comments are unbearably rude and usually are the product of "trolls." I'm not sure if these people have colorful, Don King-style hair, but they are just as annoying as King on his best day. A troll cruises various message boards and posts controversial or off-subject comments just to get a rise out of people. For example, a troll might post, "Dustin Michael Harris sucks" on one of the many fan site message boards celebrating my awesomeness. The result would be an onslaught of outraged comments from my millions upon millions of fans. At the very least, my mom would get pretty steamed.

Dealing with trolls is simple - don't take the bait. And whatever you do, please do not get into a back and forth argument with someone in a comment forum. It's pointless.

Also, remember that some people really depend on their e-mail accounts for important things like bank statements, bill updates, letters from friends and work correspondence. Please, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD DO NOT SEND FORWARDS unless you absolutely cannot avoid it. Work forwards are OK, but the latest chain letter you've been sent or a message urging me to "pass this on if you love Jesus" is not something anyone needs. Last time I checked, the Bible didn't say anything about expressing one's love for Jesus via annoying e-mail forwards.

This is just my own policy, but some forwards instantly result in my deletion of that person from either a friend or contact list. For example, anything claiming Barack Obama is a Muslim terrorist; John McCain gave away American secrets while he was a POW in Vietnam; the Holocaust wasn't real; or anything racist is grounds for an instant Web divorce. The sheer stupidity of such forwards is enough to make me re-evaluate my Internet friendship with the person in question. I encourage each of you to draw up your own boundaries and rigorously enforce them.

Deciphering text messaging can be baffling even for the most seasoned users and one of these days I'll write an entire column on that alone. In the meantime, visit the site NetLingo.com for some help. The online dictionary has every Internet acronym you can think of.

Finally, the best advice is to use your brain. For example, don't post the message, "Susan, I'm so sorry to hear about your chlamydia. If there's anything I can do, let me know. :)" to someone's public Facebook or MySpace comment walls. While the sentiment is nice, do Susie a favor and send her a private message.

In this ever increasing world of dwindling privacy and digital visibility, it's important that we not completely lose our basic respect and dignity while navigating the Web. The potential to embarrass yourself or someone else to an audience of hundreds, even thousands of people at once is a reality. Shea's golden rule is easy to ignore when you're sitting in your room, completely alone and faceless. It's easier to be vicious or flip when hiding behind an alias. But the more the rest of us enforce some code of netiquette, the tougher such behavior will become.

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